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REFERENCES

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DYING TO LIVE: SCIENCE AND THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE by Susan Blackmore. London: Grafton, 1993. Pp. xii + 291. \$23.95, hardcover. ISBN 0-586-09212-9.

It used to be that if a person asked a suitably inclined parapsychologist for scientific evidence that supported the reality of an afterlife, the said parapsychologist most likely informed the person about investigations of spiritualist mediums or children who claimed to remember previous lives. Nowadays, the person in quest for evidence of an afterlife is just as likely to be referred to the testimonials of a much larger group of more mundane individuals who claim to have had direct experience of the great beyond while on the verge of dying. This so-called near-death experience (NDE) has become a hot topic in recent years, but most of the research and theorizing has been conducted by psychologists and physicians who have little or no connection to parapsychology. One of the few exceptions is Susan Blackmore, who, ironically, is also very skeptical about paranormal claims made for NDEs.

Except for her own oft-repeated and much ballyhooed testimonials regarding her conversion to skepticism about psi, Blackmore is best known for her extensive research and writing on out-of-body experiences (OBEs). Because OBEs are so closely related to NDEs, a book on NDEs is a logical next step for her. She also has experienced OBEs herself, which gives her a valuable, even if indirect, phenomenological perspective on the NDE.

Dying to Live is intended not only as an unbiased summary of research and theory on the NDE, but as a defense of Blackmore's thesis that the NDE can be explained as solely the product of the dying brain. The

author goes to great lengths to present and refute the arguments of other theorists, particularly Kenneth Ring and Michael Sabom, who maintain that NDEs provide evidence for an afterlife or at least an alternative reality. For the most part, Blackmore treats her opponents in the debate respectfully and responsively, except on a few occasions when she condescends to suggest that those who hold a viewpoint other than her own do so because it is psychologically comforting for them. Her principal rhetorical strategy is to demonstrate that the "dying brain hypothesis" does a better job than the "afterlife hypothesis" of fulfilling the criteria of a good scientific theory, such as avoiding ad hoc assumptions, accounting for details of the experience, and generating testable predictions.

She opens the book by providing some descriptive data. We learn that NDEs show some phenomenological consistency throughout history and across cultures, but that they are not invariant. The literature suggests that between 22 and 40 percent of those who survive a close encounter with death report NDEs. Blackmore disputes the notion that an NDE-prone personality has yet been reliably demonstrated. Although a number of distinct phenomenological characteristics of the NDE have been identified, she argues that they don't converge very well in individual cases; a typical case contains several but not all of these components, and which components are present can vary quite a bit between cases.

Blackmore uses this lack of coherence to justify treating the various components of the NDE separately in later chapters. This approach is necessary, because the hypothesized mechanisms are not always the same. What they share is a foundation in physiology or mainstream cognitive psychology—nothing mental (in the sense of Cartesian dualism), and certainly nothing paranormal. Blackmore explains the often cited NDE component of approaching a white or yellow light at the end of a tunnel as neuronal disinhibition most likely resulting from anoxia in the dying brain. More specifically, movement through the tunnel is depicted as a bright circle of light becoming progressively larger, a known effect of neural disinhibition as it spreads outward from the retino-cortical areas devoted to the center of the visual field. She attributes the emotionally positive nature of most NDEs to the stress-induced release of endorphins in the brain. Further, she uses the fact that these endorphins lower seizure thresholds in the brain's temporal lobes and limbic system to account for the hallucinatory aspects of the NDE, particularly the past-life review.

For other components of the NDE, such as the OBE, the level of analysis is psychological rather than physiological. Blackmore reprises her previously published OBE theory, which states that the OBE represents a breakdown in the usual cognitive map of reality as a response to

a lack of sensory input and denigration of the body schema. She attributes the sense of timelessness (particularly in the past-life review), and the difficulty NDEers often have of being able to say who decided that they return to the body, to a temporary collapse of the self-concept, which is part of the reality map.

As one who approaches NDEs with preconceptions similar to Blackmore's, I found the case she makes for her hypothesis compelling. I will be interested to see how investigators like Ring and Sabom respond—now the ball is clearly in their court.

The chapter that challenges ESP during NDEs is somewhat weaker than the others because Blackmore limits herself to NDE cases. As long as she uses reports to defend her conclusion, her argument would be more compelling if she addressed and was able to discredit some of the stronger cases in the traditional OBE literature, such as the Wilmot case. Even though such cases are not NDEs, valid indicators of ESP in OBE reports would render ESP in NDEs more credible.

It bothered me that Blackmore questioned personal accounts of the ESP component of NDEs on the grounds of embellishment or faulty memory but did not apply such arguments to other aspects of the accounts that tended to support her theory. This double standard is quite common in the evaluation of evidence for psi and other unpopular hypotheses, and it often leads to biased conclusions.

Finally, on this topic, I think Blackmore makes too much of ESP in NDEs as potential evidence for the afterlife hypothesis. Even if ESP in NDEs was confirmed, it still would not prove that the mind actually leaves the body during an NDE or OBE, or that it survives the death of the body.

Although I generally agree with Blackmore's interpretation of the NDE, I differ with her on one subtle but important point. I agree that the NDE *arises from the breakdown* of a self-concept, but Blackmore proposes that the NDE *represents the absence* of a self-concept. I do not see how she can reconcile this position with the phenomenological data. In NDEs, a person commonly experiences himself or herself as a distinct being at a particular point in space, separate from the physical body and sometimes possessing a new (nonphysical) body that can move through space and interact with other independent beings. Such data suggest to me that NDEs often represent the creation of a new self-concept, rather than the absence of a self-concept. This new self-concept temporarily provides a better fit for the experiencer's input under the circumstances than does the other self-concept. I might concede that in certain stages (such as, for example, some past-life reviews), the NDE resembles a mystical experience and that the self-concept remains absent, but that is

as far as I would go. If one addresses the NDE in general terms, Blackmore's proposal of the absence of a self-concept just doesn't work.

The author seems to be heavily influenced on this point by a strong attraction she has developed to Buddhist philosophy. She frequently makes positive references to the Buddhist worldview. In fact, at times her remarks about how this worldview is both more valid and more conducive for psychological well-being than the worldview suggested by the NDE border on sermonizing.

If nothing else, this marriage of Buddhism and skepticism about the paranormal is innovative. CSICOP, for example, seems to be populated primarily by secular humanists. Although a reader might come away from this book with the mistaken impression that Buddhism and secular humanism are interchangeable doctrines, Blackmore promotes one thesis that I dare say most secular humanists, and even most parapsychologists, would find hard to accept—the denial of ontological realism. "It is not that I propose a totally different underlying reality," Blackmore boldly asserts, "rather that there is not one" (p. 162). Thus, it is not only NDEs that are illusory, but also our self-concepts and, it would seem, all our other impressions this side of nirvana. The NDE may be a delusion, but so is the whole sum of human experience. Such statements prove Blackmore to be the ultimate skeptic, deserving that label far more than most others who have embraced it.

On the other hand, I cannot help but wonder what the Buddha would have thought about Blackmore's denial of the paranormal.

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THE LITTLE BOOK OF LIFE AFTER DEATH by Gustav Fechner, including an introduction by William James with contemporary essays and commentaries. *The Journal of Pastoral Counseling: An Annual*. Vol. 27. New Rochelle, NY: Iona College, 1992. Pp. ii + 78. \$25.00, paperback.

The 1992 annual issue of the *Journal of Pastoral Counseling* contains Gustav Fechner's little-known publication *The Little Book of Life After Death* along with an introduction by William James. The issue also contains commentaries on the book by David Bakan; Eugene Taylor; W. G. Bringmann, M. W. Bringmann, and W. D. G. Balance; and Stanley Krippner. The *Little Book* is just 25 pages, whereas the commentaries, including the introduction by James, fill another 53 pages.